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THE THEOLOGY OF ALBRECHT RITSCHL.¹

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ALBRECHT RITSCHL is the most prominent name in German theology at the close of the nineteenth century, as Schleiermacher was at its beginning. The eminent German theologians of the century were students of Schleiermacher, and his name appears in their writings more frequently than that of any other modern author; yet when his influence was greatest the number of his disciples in prominent professorships, in religious journalism, and in popular and scholarly theological literature was far inferior to those who compose the Ritschl school today. Professors Harnack, Kaftan, Herrmann, Schultz, Wendt are a few of the members of this school, whose power is specially felt in the universities, in some of which they control the theological

¹ A reference to the principal works used in the preparation of this article will enable the reader to understand the authority for the statements made. The author met Ritschl at Göttingen in 1865, and also knew some of his most eminent pupils, among them Harnack and Kaftan. The following books contain the theology of Ritschl: *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, three volumes, the first giving the history of the doctrine, the second the scriptural basis, and the third the system itself; *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, intended as a basis for religious instruction in gymnasia; and *Theologie und Metaphysik*, being a reply to attacks on his system, especially to those of Luthardt, Frank, and Weiss, and at the same time explaining the relation of his theology to philosophy. On these three works the article is based; but many others have been used. His earlier books and his *Geschichte des Pietismus* are not so essential for a knowledge of his system. A brief but clear exposition and defense of Ritschl's theology is given by Pastor Julius Thikoetter: *Darstellung und Beurtheilung der Theologie Albrecht Ritschl's*. The works of other disciples, particularly those of Herrmann, are also important. An elaborate critique of Ritschl's philosophical basis is given by L. Staehlin: *Kant, Lotze und Ritschl*, translated by Dr. D. W. Simon, Edinburgh. Professor Pfeiderer, Berlin, the liberal theologian, subjects to keen criticism the philosophical and theological views of Ritschl in *Die Ritschl'sche Lehre*.

The references to Ritschl's works are always made to the first edition. Numerous changes were made in the later editions, but they do not affect the essential elements of his system.

faculty. The activity of the members is marvelous and embraces all departments of religious thought and life. The interest excited by the new theology extends to the orthodox and the various shades of liberalism, to Catholics as well as Protestants, to members of the Greek church and to such as make no religious profession, and to America as well as to the different countries of Europe.

Theologians who are not familiar with the German language find it difficult to form a clear conception of this system. The style of Ritschl is involved, and many of his sentences are untranslatable. He used old terms, but not always in the old sense. Both in method and doctrine he breaks with traditionalism and proposes to inaugurate a new era in theology. Even in its native land theologians dispute about the meaning and tendency of this system, and Ritschl and his followers have frequently complained that they are misunderstood and misrepresented. For two decades their teachings have been subjects of violent controversy; and the attacks of the orthodox and liberals, and the defense by the Ritschlians, have not lessened the confusion. The time for a final decision on the merits of this theology has not come; we have not the needed perspective, and the advocates and opponents are too partisan. But whatever may be merely tentative in the way of criticism, the basis on which the system rests, its chief doctrines, and its relation to the traditional views can be given. Nor are the power and rapid spread of the new theology a mystery. It is in a peculiar sense a product of the times and for the times. Ritschl has produced one of the most important epochs in the religious thought of Germany since the days of Luther; and if this epoch is to be understood it must be studied in connection with its age and its immediate environment. It is as true of Ritschl as of Luther, Spener, Wesley, and Schleiermacher, that his teachings are an expression and interpretation of dominant factors in his age; and it is chiefly to this fact that we must attribute their rapid spread.

1. *The fundamental conceptions of Ritschl's theology.*—The religious and theological training of Ritschl belongs to that

period of criticism and negation when the most scholarly attacks known to history were made on the person and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Born in Berlin, March 25, 1822, he studied at the universities of Bonn, Halle, Heidelberg, and Tübingen. F. C. Baur, the learned founder and leader of the Tübingen school, was agitating theology by his radical criticism of the books of the New Testament and of the character of the primitive church. In 1835 Strauss published his *Leben Jesu*, in which he attempted to reduce the most essential elements in the life of Jesus to myths. Sixty years after the appearance of that book we can form but a faint conception of the excitement and even consternation which it caused in theological and religious circles. The theological literature of the day teemed with christological discussions; all the eminent evangelical theologians wrote in defense of the genuineness of the picture given of Christ in the gospels; in every university the life of Jesus was an absorbing theme; the very attacks made the church aware of the value of the person of Christ. This was the atmosphere in which Ritschl spent his student life. At Bonn he came under the influence of Nitzsch, who aimed to unite into one system dogmatics and ethics, which were usually treated separately, and who emphasized love as the essential element of religion. He came in contact with Tholuck at Halle, and gave this significant criticism of the eminent theologian: "Tholuck is scientifically incommensurable. . . . The one fixed thing in him is his subjectivity." He was evidently more deeply influenced by Erdmann, the Hegelian professor of philosophy at Halle, than by Tholuck. Hegel's philosophy was, indeed, losing its prestige in Germany, but was still studied eagerly in universities. Baur and Strauss and the whole Tübingen school adopted its principles both in their destructive criticism and their constructive work. The theological negations attributed to Hegelianism were prominent factors in ending the reign of this philosophy. Under Erdmann, and later under Baur, Ritschl was affected by Hegelian speculation, but, in common with the trend of the times, he experienced a reaction against its abstractions and its dogmatism. Near the close of his life, in criticising the views of an opponent who

insisted on conceiving God as the Absolute, he exclaimed: "The Absolute! How sublime the sound! Dimly only do I remember that this word occupied my thoughts in youth, when the Hegelian terminology threatened to draw me as well as others into its vortex. It is long ago, and the word has become strange to me since I found that it contained no fruitful thought."²

Ritschl was attracted to the University of Tübingen by the fame of Baur, particularly by his *History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, published in 1838. Although he was not one of Baur's most devoted pupils, his first works were written in the critical spirit of the Tübingen school, *The Gospel of Marcion and the Canonical Gospel of Luke*, 1846, and *The Origin of the Old Catholic Church*, 1850. He was too independent a thinker to remain long under Baur's leadership. Renewed study convinced him that the speculative basis and philosophical constructions of the Tübingen school are false, and that its criticism is one-sided and more destructive than the facts warrant. He passed through the school and abandoned it, and his knowledge of its principles enabled him the more successfully to attack them. In 1857 he published the second edition of *The Origin of the Old Catholic Church*, and stated in the preface that he was obliged to antagonize the conclusions of the Tübingen school "principiantly and radically." He rejected the theory that the conflict between the original apostles and Paul with respect to the Judaistic element in Christianity determined the character of the literature of the New Testament and of the early church; and instead of accepting with that school only Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians, as Pauline epistles, he defended the genuineness of nearly every book in the New Testament.

It is not necessary for our purpose to trace the career of Ritschl. His studies, his lectures, his books, and the development of his system so absorbed his time and energies that he had little left for practical affairs. He became *Privat-Docent* in the University of Bonn in 1846, professor extraordinary 1853, and professor ordinary 1860. From 1864 until his death, March 20, 1889, he was professor of dogmatic theology in the

² *Theologie und Metaphysik*, p. 16.

University of Göttingen. It was during the twenty-five years spent at this institution that he completed his system and formed what is known as the Ritschl, or Göttingen, school.

About the middle of this century there occurred a reaction against speculative philosophy in Germany similar to that which Ritschl experienced respecting Hegel's system and the philosophical basis of the school of Baur. The fifty years from the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in 1781, till the death of Hegel, in 1831, are without a parallel in philosophical speculation. Empirical investigations were depreciated by thinkers like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and God and man and the universe were to be interpreted by metaphysics. So unsatisfactory, however, were the results that the very name of philosophy fell into disrepute. Its teachings were looked upon as vague and uncertain, its study was pronounced fruitless, and scholars questioned whether it has a specific sphere and definite objects, and whether its realm is not fiction instead of reality. The great change which now occurred put empirical investigation in place of metaphysical speculation. The reign of natural science began, promoted by the definiteness of its objects, the mathematical exactness of its method, and the finality of its results, and by its marvelous discoveries and their practical application to the arts. A demand for realism followed idealism; what reason had failed to discover was now thought to lie within the province of the senses and experience, so that sensationalism and empiricism took the place of rationalism, and the subjectiveness which philosophy was supposed to have fostered gave way to the clamor for objective realism. The scientific method became so dominant that it was made the test for the human disciplines as well as for natural science. History, psychology, philosophy, ethics, theology, and religion were to be made scientific, and if this was not possible their value and validity were questioned. An era of naturalism prevailed during which materialism was spread among the cultured and the masses. As Lotze said, it was strange that the mind, the only object which can interpret matter, should lose itself in matter. Unless atheism was openly avowed,

agnosticism respecting spiritual objects was professed extensively in scholarly circles.

One system retained its hold on scholars during this period of the disintegration of philosophical schools, that of Kant. It is not his entire system which is conserved in neo-Kantianism, but only what is known as his theory of knowledge. His ethical principles, his acceptance of God, freedom, and immortality, and many of his speculations, are rejected; but so much of his philosophy as harmonizes with the modern empirical and scientific trend is retained. Kant is commonly regarded as the great metaphysician; but he, more than any other thinker, destroyed metaphysic, showing that speculations about objects which transcend experience are not within the limits of human reason. We may have ideas which transcend experience, but we have no means of demonstrating the existence of real objects which correspond with these ideas. We can never tell what things are in themselves or *per se* (*das Ding an sich*). We receive certain impressions; there are appearances or phenomena in consciousness; we cannot go beyond these to the things which produce them. Our world, therefore, is phenomenal, a world of appearances. Kant himself, while thus limiting the speculative reason, left a large and valid sphere for what he called the practical reason. In one place he says that he found it necessary to destroy knowledge, or what was taken for knowledge, in order to find room for faith. He aimed to substitute rigorous criticism for unfounded metaphysic and arrogant intellectual dogmatism. Kant has been called "the all-crushing one," and his system is properly designated the "critical philosophy." No other thinker has an equal share in making the critical spirit and method dominant in modern thought.

The situation thus outlined is essential for understanding the basis of Ritschl's theology. For this basis we go to his own experience and to the age. He abandoned the traditional theology when he entered the Tübingen school; when he left that school and rejected its speculations he was obliged to determine his philosophical status and lay the foundation for his faith and his theology. It was evident to him that in the early church,

in the Middle Ages, and since the days of Descartes, too much influence had been exerted on theology by philosophy. Especially was this influence felt in Germany, where theologians have so often been designated as Kantian or Hegelian, and where a philosophical system rather than revelation was frequently made the determining factor. This was recognized by Schleiermacher, and he desired to make religion and theology more independent of philosophy, but was himself too much of a philosopher to accomplish this aim.

The statement so often made that Ritschl opposes philosophy is a mistake. What he opposes is the determination of the character of religious doctrines by means of any philosophical system. He admits that every theologian requires a theory of knowledge as the basis of his investigations and for the construction of his system. The problem for solution, therefore, was how to give theology the most solid foundation and the best logical form, without permitting philosophy to pervert the teachings of religion. His main contention is that metaphysic ought to be banished from religion and theology; but metaphysic is not the whole of philosophy. His opposition to speculation in religious matters is emphatic and fundamental for his system. Theoretical knowledge, he holds, cannot discover spiritual objects or judge them; all that pertains to religion must be determined religiously and practically. Reason cannot find a basis for religion or prove the existence of God; its efforts to do so he regards as a perversion of religion. There is, he says, no natural religion, no natural theology. By thus assigning to religion a sphere peculiar to itself, he claims that it lies beyond the domain of philosophy and science, and cannot be affected by their attacks.

By far the most important point in Ritschl's relation to philosophy is his theory of knowledge. These two problems were to be solved: What are the conditions for attaining certainty in religious doctrines? What method shall prevail in theology? It was common for theologians to follow the *a priori* or deductive method; with the help of philosophy some principles or ideas were postulated as final, and from these the theological

system was deduced. If the principles or ideas were questioned, the entire system was invalidated.

Ritschl's experience in the Hegelian philosophy and the school of Baur, and a study of the existing state of theology, convinced him that this method gives no secure basis. Recognizing the validity of empirical knowledge, he turned from speculation to experience for the substance of religious truth. He is so afraid of speculation and theory that he never ventures far beyond the knowledge obtained directly through experience. If reason has free play with this empirical knowledge, it may put empty abstractions and deceitful fictions for the practical truth needed in religion.

Through the influence of Kant and Lotze, the latter his colleague for many years in the University of Göttingen, he denied that we have, or can have, any knowledge of what things are in themselves. Our religious world is phenomenal; aside from the phenomena we know nothing about spiritual objects. Metaphysic as ontology deals with things *per se*, with the nature of objects as distinct from the phenomena in consciousness; it has nothing to do with religion and must be wholly excluded from theology. We know what impressions we receive in religion; we can define them as spiritual; but we can form no conception of what spirit itself is. The impressions received are ultimate for us; we cannot know being, substance, or essence. Ontology is impossible.

It is evident that thus the old metaphysical basis of theology is gone. Theologians were accustomed to speak confidently and dogmatically of the nature of God and of the human soul. This nature of God and the divine attributes thought to inhere in this nature were made the seed from which theology was developed. The greatness of the revolution at which Ritschl aimed is seen in the fact that he pronounces such a conception of God a fiction; it is ontological, not religious or theological. God was usually defined as the Absolute; for this there is no warrant, he said. What shall religious thought do with the Absolute? God thus becomes the Unrelated One; but every thought of God that has significance for us brings him into practical relation with us. At

best, speculation on the nature of God ends in pantheism. Ritschl, therefore, rejects all speculation and theory about the being of God, and says that the cosmological and teleological arguments can give no conception of his nature or demonstration of his existence.

What, then, is the criterion of religious truth? In Ritschl's answer we discover the strong influence of Lotze. Lotze still more than Kant emphasizes the ethical factor in philosophy. He teaches that for us the question of supreme importance is not what things are in themselves—a question which in reality does not concern us—but how they are related to us. Theoretical knowledge, according to Lotze, aims solely at the truth; but in ethics we aim at determining questions of value. Our ethical judgments are value-judgments (*Werth-Urtheile*). Ritschl agrees with Lotze respecting these value-judgments, and applies them to religion as well as to ethics. Thus, instead of the usual intellectual or speculative tests, his criterion of religious objects is their value for us. The existence of God cannot be demonstrated by the reason; but we need him, and this is evidence enough for his existence. Here the matter rests. It might be argued that we are so made that what is really adapted to our nature cannot deceive us, but must be true; for Ritschl, however, this would be too theoretical, and he makes no effort to show why value-judgments are final. If what is practical is ultimate, then it is inconsistent to go to theoretical knowledge for the demonstration of what is practical. Otto Ritschl, the son of Albrecht, has, however, written a book to show that our judgments ultimately rest on judgments of value.

2. *The theological doctrines.* (a) *The Scriptures.*—Religion in its purity, without the admixture of any foreign element, is the aim of Ritschl. After dismissing speculation, natural religion, and natural theology, he finds but one source of religion left, and that is revelation. Christianity is the perfect religion; Jesus Christ is its author; and he is the source of the revelation. Ritschl does not attempt to explain how Jesus obtained this revelation; he treats it as an ultimate fact. The value of this revelation is the final appeal; and its value is evident

from its effect on the first disciples and on humanity since their day.

While he proposes to base theology wholly on the revelation given in Christ, he rejects the traditional views of inspiration. He puts no theory of his own in their place, and regards any theory on the subject as not only useless, but an actual hindrance to theology.

He makes the significance of the Old Testament consist in the fact that it prepares the way for the New Testament. Its teachings are not in themselves authoritative for us; only what is distinctly recognized and developed in the New is of abiding value. Even the contents of the New Testament must be used critically.³ A view which stands isolated as that of an individual author may not be authoritative; the test of validity is the consensus of the writers or the fact that a doctrine was held by the early church. In his own exegesis he exercises great freedom in the use of the teachings of the New Testament. In every instance the theologian must determine by critical investigation and comparison what shall be received as an integral part of Christian doctrine. But the aim of criticism is a valid knowledge of Christianity and the construction of the system of Christian truth. We can best define his method by designating it as critically constructive. The fact that a doctrine fits in the general system of Christian truth is naturally a decisive evidence in its favor.

We have no writings by Jesus himself, the source of all revelation; how, then, do we obtain a knowledge of his teachings? From the testimony of the disciples. From this we learn the immediate effect of his doctrine. In the consciousness of the first disciples and of the early church we have a reflection of the consciousness of Christ. In this way we get the Christian religion in its pure form; later it was perverted by the introduction of philosophical views from Plato and Aristotle.

³ In *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, Vol. II, p. 15, Ritschl says that "the theology which wants to learn the Christian religion from its original sources depends solely on the writings of the New Testament. If the thoughts of the apostles can be proved to have been influenced in subordinate matters by apocryphal works, then, of course, they are not authoritative for theology."

The intimate relation between the Old Testament and the New gives Ritschl a criterion for making an important distinction between the literature of the primitive church and of a later period. The Christian writers who succeeded the apostles professed to adopt their views, but they fail to place themselves so directly on the Old Testament. The intimate relation of a book to the Old Testament is, therefore, evidence in favor of its apostolic origin or of its belonging to the productions of the primitive church.

(*b*) *Jesus Christ*.—The central thought with respect to Christ in Ritschl's system is the fact that he is the embodiment and source of the Christian revelation and founder of the kingdom of God. So far as the nature of Christ is concerned, we have a direct application of Ritschl's claim that things in themselves cannot be known. All questions pertaining to the nature or the substance of the person of Christ are dismissed as irrelevant. This removes from consideration that part of the christological problem which has so long been regarded as fundamental for theology, namely, the relation of Christ's nature to that of the Father. He, indeed, emphasizes Christ's oneness with the Father and makes this the ground of the validity of the Christian doctrines; but this unity with the Father is not a metaphysical judgment respecting the substance of Christ's person, of which we know nothing; it only means that the will of Christ is the same as that of God. Christ realizes the purpose of God, and Christ's work is God's work; therefore he is called the Son of God, therefore the attributes of divinity are ascribed to him, and he is revered as divine.

Ritschl's exegesis of John 10:30; 17:11, 21, 22, is significant. Here Christ affirms his oneness with the Father; but in the latter passages the oneness with the Father has its analogy in the unity of believers. Believers, however, are not one in substance, but in disposition, in will, in aim; therefore Ritschl argues that the same kind of unity must exist between God and Christ.

The specific purpose which is declared to make Christ one with God is his aim to establish the kingdom of God. In this mission of Christ all his aims and labors are concentrated, so

that in the establishment of the kingdom we behold the culmination and completion of his work. The purpose of God to establish the kingdom is already manifest in the Old Testament, but what other prophets only foretold Jesus, the royal prophet, actually accomplishes. "Jesus does not stop where the other prophets did, at the proclamation of the nearness of God's kingdom, but he is the prophet who, by means of his peculiar activity, at last actually establishes the reign of God. . . . It is in his prophetic activity that he is the embodiment of the divine reign, and in respect to his peculiar relation to God his Father he is superior to David."⁴

The practical aspect of Christ is thus the absorbing one, namely, the activity of Christ, which Ritschl calls the ethical view. He holds that the reality of a personal life consists solely in its action; therefore Christ's activity is the sole test of his relation to the Father. "Whoever can say of himself that his continuous official activity is the work of God proves by his very life-work the claimed unity with God."⁵

Christ's place is unique. He alone is the founder of the kingdom which others had foretold and whose benefits are shared by multitudes. This uniqueness of Christ does not, however, imply that he is unapproachable by others in character. Ritschl says that, when Christ is called divine, we are not to suppose that he is absolutely exalted above the members of his church. The attribute of divinity ascribed to him is to be taken as a guarantee that the whole of human nature can be made divine.⁶ In one respect, however, Christ is unapproachable: the

⁴ HERZOG, *Real-Encyclopaedie*, 2d ed.; "Reich Gottes," an article by Ritschl.

⁵ *Theologie und Metaphysik*, p. 28.

⁶ *Unterricht*, p. 22. Ritschl states that the grace, the faithfulness, and the victory over the world, manifested in Christ's life and death, are the very attributes of God which are significant for the Christian religion. And as these divine attributes are found in Christ, we can call him divine. "Dabei ist vorbehalten, dass die Gottheit Christi nicht als Ausdruck eines absoluten Abstandes seiner Person von den Gliedern seiner Gemeinde verstanden werde. Vielmehr ist jenes Attribut ursprünglich so gemeint, dass die Gottheit Christi für die Vergöttung der ganzen menschlichen Natur unmittelbare Bürgschaft leiste." On p. 46 Ritschl states that the Protestant is free from the fear respecting God which animates the Catholic; and in order to have the courage to seek the righteousness of the kingdom of God he needs no other guarantee than "the grace of God revealed in the man Jesus Christ."

glory of establishing the kingdom belongs exclusively to him. No one before him entered into that intimate relation with God which enabled him to manifest so fully the divine will as Christ did. God is seen in the aim of Jesus to save the human family by establishing this kingdom. In the steadfastness of this aim and in the victory over the world which Christ proclaims as his mission we have the proof of his oneness with the Father. No opposition of the world, not even his crucifixion, can affect this union with God. Ritschl uses various expressions to indicate Christ's relation to the Father, but the meaning of all is that his life-work, the establishment of the kingdom, is God's work, and therefore he and the Father are one.

This oneness with God gives peculiar significance to the word of Jesus. No less in his word than in his work is he a manifestation of God. Jesus gives the perfect revelation of the perfect religion. In the study of the New Testament it must be our aim to get the testimony of Christ as the revelation of God.⁷

There is no place in this scheme for the orthodox view of Christ's death. This will become more evident when we consider Ritschl's doctrine of God and of sin. The atonement and the system of redemption based on it are eliminated. The death of Christ belongs to the purpose of his life to do the will of God; it is an evidence of his faithfulness, and proves that all the powers of the world cannot affect his purpose to establish the kingdom of God. The church sees in the crucifixion the demonstration that Christ's confidence in the Father was unbounded and that his victory over the world was complete. The death of Christ on the cross is for the believer the strongest motive for trusting God, for faithfulness in the discharge of duty,

⁷ In one place Ritschl says: "Now Jesus, in that he is the first to make real in his own life the aim of God's kingdom, is for this reason peculiar, because everyone accomplishing just as perfectly the same aim would be dependent of him, and, therefore, would be unlike him. Therefore, as the archetype of the human beings who are to be so united as to form the kingdom of God, he is the original object of God's love, so that the very love of God to the members of the kingdom is mediated solely through him. If, therefore, this person (Christ), devoted to a peculiar calling, animated by the constant motive of disinterested love for humanity, is properly appreciated, he will be recognized as the perfect revelation of God as love, grace, and faithfulness."

and for striving to overcome the world. The Father gives his approval of Christ's work by raising him from the dead.

The work of Christ is viewed chiefly as prophetic. But as Christ not merely submits to the will of the Father, but freely chooses that will, even unto death, for the sake of establishing the kingdom of God, he sacrifices himself for the sake of the church, and therefore he is a priest. Through the victory gained over the world by the kingdom he establishes we have the kingly office of Christ.

By the preëxistence of Christ Ritschl understands that God from eternity loved Christ as the one who should come into the world as the founder of the kingdom. Jesus has no actual, personal existence before his birth at Bethlehem; but he existed in the divine mind because God foresaw and foreordained his coming. Ritschl has nothing to say with respect to Christ's sitting at the right hand of God. It is something of which we can have no experience, and, therefore, it has no significance for us. Christ is, however, still active on earth; that is, the kingdom which he established continues the work which he began. All our knowledge of Christ is confined to his historic manifestation on earth.⁸

Ritschl's Christology is dominated by his theory of value-judgments. The supreme consideration is what Christ is to us and does for us, his value for our hearts and life. He saves us from the dominion of the world and brings us to God, and that is enough. What Christ does for us is made the basis of all affirmations respecting him; but Ritschl limits these affirmations to what is recognized as having some practical bearing. Theories which transcend estimates of value he rejects. Large spheres of the old theology are assigned by him to the realm of agnosticism. Respecting eschatology, whether based on Christ's discourses or the teachings of the apostles, he has little to say. His system does not include an extended or definite escha-

⁸ "Now, Christ is manifest to us neither as preëxistent nor as exalted on the right hand of God, but solely as he appeared in his earthly life; and his action on men in the state of exaltation is nothing more than a continuance of the action of his historical appearance — of his phenomenal existence and life on earth." STAHLIN, *Kant, Lotze und Ritschl*, p. 224.

tology. We can confidently leave the future to the love of the Father.

(c) *The doctrine of God*.—How little Ritschl can avoid theorizing is evident from his account of the source of religion; but when he does theorize on ethics and religion, he generally states that what is thus learned is equally established by practical considerations. Theological speculation has heretofore been especially prominent in the discussion of the doctrine of God, and Ritschl's attempt to do away with speculation in theology becomes most marked in his treatment of this doctrine. He teaches that God cannot be known by means of worldly wisdom, but solely through the revelation given in Christ. He goes farther and says: "If a Christian attempts to obtain metaphysical knowledge of God, he abandons his Christian standpoint and takes the standpoint which, in general, corresponds with the position of heathenism."⁹

Man is a part of nature, subject to its laws, and limited and oppressed by the natural objects about him; but he also has spiritual energies which distinguish him from material objects and point to a supernatural destiny. It is in this contrast in man that the source of religion is found. By means of the idea of God and by putting man into relation with God this contrast in human nature becomes more marked, and the conflict between the aspiration of the soul and the depressing influence of material things is intensified. The significance of the idea of God consists in the fact that it frees man from the dominion of nature and enables him to realize his aspirations. Ritschl defines religion as "the spiritual organ of man which, with God's help, is to free him from the ordinary natural limitations of his being."¹⁰ God thus becomes the means of attaining what man recognizes as the chief end of his existence. "Every religious conception is based on the fact that the human mind distinguishes itself in some degree, so far as value is estimated, from the surrounding phenomena and the influences of nature. All religion is an interpretation of the course of the world; and

⁹ *Theologie und Metaphysik*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, Vol. III, p. 174.

according to this interpretation the exalted Power which rules in or over this course maintains the worth of the personal spirit against the limitations of nature and against the natural effects of human society." ¹¹

This purely practical aim of religion is fully realized in the conception of God given by Christ. From Christ we learn what God does for us; he is estimated according to his value in enabling us to attain our destiny. Ritschl claims that the essence of God is love, and that this conception of him is exhaustive and the means of interpreting all the divine attributes. This love involves his personality; also his omnipotence and omniscience, for otherwise he could not execute his loving purpose. Ritschl teaches that no other doctrine respecting God is required than that he is love and that he purposes to establish his kingdom of love through Christ, the eternally Beloved One.

As thus absorbed by the idea of love, God must be viewed in his relation to men solely as intent on their salvation. God's holiness means his exaltation, his solitariness, not that he abhors sin; his righteousness does not demand punishment or satisfaction for guilt, but it means grace which seeks the sinner's redemption; wrath is not an attribute of God, but something which the sinner under conviction ascribes to God.

Human beings, or beings with something akin to God in them, are the objects of divine love. He cannot love the material world, because it is too different from him. Yet the world must be viewed from the standpoint of God as love, for he creates the material universe in order to accomplish his loving purpose to save men. The value of the world consists in the fact that it ministers to men as objects of God's love.

Ritschl teaches that it is not enough to define God as personality or as good. Instead of abstractions we want what is concrete and actual. It is essential that we know the quality of the divine personality and the specific direction of the divine will. Therefore he defines God as love in that he makes it his

¹¹ *Theologie und Metaphysik*, p. 7.

aim to train the human family for the kingdom of God, in which man is to reach his supernatural destiny.¹²

(d) *Man*.—In what might be called his anthropology Ritschl's conception of sin is fundamental. He rejects the doctrine of natural and total depravity taught by Augustine and the reformers of the sixteenth century. "Neither Jesus nor any writer of the New Testament hints or presupposes that through natural generation sin is made general; the passages of the Old Testament which approach this view are not doctrinal and no law for the Christian conception."¹³ Nothing in our nature or destiny implies that sin is inevitable, and we must admit the possibility of a sinless life. "Therefore the sinlessness of Jesus is not in conflict with his human nature."¹⁴ But while men are not born with or in sin, there is a possibility and strong probability of sinning. The will which ought to choose the good has no perfect knowledge of the good; it is attracted to the world and comes under the dominion of material things; in human society it comes in contact with sin and is perverted. Sin thus comes in the process of the individual's development, and manifests itself particularly in the form of selfishness. So far as we can learn from observation, sin is universal. We can designate this reign of sin as the kingdom of sin, in distinction from the kingdom of God. Man being ignorant of the good, selfish, controlled by material interests, his sin means alienation from God; it prevents the union of men in the kingdom of God, and it hinders the promotion of God's glory by means of this kingdom. This sinful tendency can be overcome only by the complete subjection of the will of man to the will of God, whereby the world is conquered and the exalted destiny of the soul attained.

We cannot ascribe the punishment of sin to any direct act of God, similar to the sentence of a criminal by an earthly judge. The punishment for sin consists in the natural conse-

¹² "Gott ist also die Liebe, insofern als er seinen Selbstzweck setzt in die Heranbildung des Menschengeschlechts zum Reiche Gottes als der überweltlichen Zweckbestimmung der Menschen selbst." (*Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, Vol. III, p. 242.)

¹³ *Unterricht*, p. 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

quences of sin ; these consequences can be viewed only as divine punishment for sin so far as God is the creator and ruler of the world. Sin thus punishes itself. Through his attachment to the world the sinner excludes himself from communion with God and prevents the attainment of the true aim of life, and that means punishment. Sin is an affair of the disposition as well as of the life ; but inasmuch as the sinner does not fully know the good or the effects of his conduct, we must judge sin as essentially ignorance.

How, now, are we to conceive the process of redemption ? It is a process which takes place exclusively in man ; it has no effect whatever on God, who is unchangeable. The external significance of redemption consists in taking the sinner from the dominion of the world and making him a member of the kingdom of God. Since God is love, he needs no reconciliation, but is always ready to receive the sinner into communion with himself. The sinner's conversion ends his alienation from God ; that is, he reconciles himself to God, not God to him. Christ's redemptory work thus affects man, but has no effect on God's relation to man. Jesus by means of his teaching, his life, and his death reveals God as love, showing that the Father waits to welcome the sinner. When the sinner finds himself mistaken in viewing God as angry with him and learns that God loves him, his enmity ceases and his attitude to God changes from alienation to communion. Thus sin viewed as ignorance is overcome by the removal of this ignorance in the act of conversion. A change in disposition is, however, also involved. The sinner now recognizes God as his Father, responds with love to God's love, and chooses the kingdom with its purpose of love as his kingdom. Christ is the mediator in so far as he reveals God and establishes the kingdom of God ; he is to the sinner the personification and image of God, the embodiment of the divine love and purpose of redemption, the Logos in whom are revealed the reason and will of the Father. The sinner is saved through the faith which only Christ makes possible.

In Ritschl's theology, therefore, we must interpret atonement, redemption, reconciliation, justification, salvation, and

similar terms, as involving a change which takes place in man when regenerated and converted, a change which affects his relation to God, to the world, and to the kingdom of God, but which does not affect the purpose, the attitude, or the will of God.

Conversion must be viewed as a continuous process, whose genuineness is attested by the believer's faithfulness in his specific calling. Christian perfection can be attained by the humblest servant as well as by the most exalted dignitary in the church. Ritschl has no sympathy with a quietistic or ascetic life; our calling in this world is to be viewed as from God, and faithfulness in it is the proof of Christian character. Christ's faithfulness unto death is the model. The religious life is action; but its activity is based on perfect confidence in the Father and on the assurance of the richest blessings in the performance of duty. As theology exists for the sake of religion, and as religion exists for man's welfare, so we find that Ritschl emphasizes the comforting, sustaining, and helpful elements in Christianity. According to him the religious view of the world regards God as having all the forces of nature under his control for the help of man. Miracles are declared to be striking natural phenomena in which the believer experiences special help from God, and which are to be considered as peculiar evidences of God's readiness to extend his grace to his children. Miracles are, therefore, involved in faith in God's providence, but have no other significance. A miracle always presupposes faith. "Whoever has religious faith will experience miracles in himself, and in comparison with these nothing is less necessary than to be concerned about miracles which others have experienced."¹⁵ In other words, for speculative or theoretical knowledge miracles have no significance.

(e) *The kingdom of God.*—To Ritschl belongs the credit of giving prominence to the kingdom of God, which had long been neglected by theologians. The prominence given to this subject almost warrants us in calling his system the theology of the kingdom. Thikoetter says that the kingdom of God is the leading

¹⁵ *Unterricht*, pp. 13-14.

principle of this theology, that it is the highest good, and the central religious and ethical idea from which the whole of systematic divinity must be developed. The kingdom of God as the ultimate divine purpose "determines creation, redemption, and sanctification."¹⁶ In distinction from the individualistic tendency which has been a marked feature of Protestantism, we have in the new theology a striking religious socialism.

Ritschl is radically opposed to mysticism or the attempt of the individual to revel in direct personal communion with God. Such communion he regards as too subjective, as liable to deception, and as the occasion of fanaticism. The Christian is declared to sustain no immediate relation to Christ; the only relation he sustains to him is through the congregation of believers. The believer as an individual is not the object of God's love, but the totality or congregation of believers; the individual Christian is partaker of this love only so far as he is a member of this congregation. Even the assurance of pardon can come only through union with the church. "The forgiveness of sin is not a blessing which each one has perpetually to achieve anew through individual conviction of sin and of need, but the totality of the religious congregation possesses the highest good, and of this the individual becomes a possessor by belonging to that congregation."¹⁷ Ritschl says that, as God can be known only through Christ, so can he be known only through membership in the church. The church is the mediator of all the truth and grace which come from the Father through Christ. The congregation of believers thus takes the place on earth which Christ occupied during his earthly life, so that only through this congregation is any Christian knowledge or Christian relation possible. "Justification or redemption, inasmuch as it is positively dependent on the historical manifestation and activity of Christ, applies first of all to the totality of that religious congregation which Christ established; and it applies

¹⁶ *Darstellung und Beurtheilung der Theologie Albrecht Ritschl's.*

¹⁷ *Thikoetter, l. c., p. 18.* Just before the quotation the author says that the believer recognizes the church as possessing the power to forgive sin, "*die Besitzerin der Sündenvergebung.*"

to individuals only in so far as by means of faith in the gospel they join this congregation."¹⁸

By thus making the church the repository of all truth and grace, and the individual Christian absolutely dependent on the church, Ritschl subjected himself to the charge of advocating the papal view. His claim for the church is not inferior to that of Catholicism; but his view of the church itself is different. He does not regard it as an external institution subject to legal enactments and obligatory ordinances and hierarchical rule, but as invisible, spiritual, the communion of saints. It is the true church of Christ of which he affirms that only through it can redemption be attained. It is a far more serious charge that the absolute dependence of the believer on the church robs him of the greatest blessing of direct communion with God. Ritschl, however, thinks it a gain in that it avoids mystical and pietistic fanaticism and the perversion of the true intent of religion.

The church, in its external form, embraces hypocrites and sinners, and, therefore, cannot be identified with the communion of saints. But, in the sense used above, as an invisible organism of true believers, the members of the church are the same as those who constitute the kingdom of God. Ritschl, however, warns against identifying the church, even in this spiritual sense, with this kingdom. The persons are the same in both cases, but their functions differ in the kingdom and the church. Believers constitute the church as a body of worshipers. The church is an institution with established ordinances, and with organs, such as ministers and church officers, to make these ordinances effective. But believers, as constituting the kingdom of God, are not united for the sake of worship, but for the purpose of Christian activity, whose motive is love. The church is thus the sphere of Christian worship; the kingdom of God is the sphere of Christian action. The aim of the Christian activity which characterizes the kingdom is the promotion of the kingdom itself as the sum of divine grace and the means of promoting the glory of God and the welfare of men. The char-

¹⁸ *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, Vol. III, p. 120.

acter of the kingdom is supernatural; therefore, changes in earthly relations—in the family, in states, and human institutions generally—do not affect the kingdom, which is subject to divine, and not to earthly, laws. The believer cannot doubt that God's purpose of love will be realized in the final triumph of this kingdom and in eternal life.

Through membership in the kingdom the love of God, of Christ, and of the kingdom itself becomes the love of the individual Christian. Believers who belong to the kingdom obtain through it the same relation to the Father which Christ sustains to him.¹⁹ By making the purpose of Christ their own, believers become like Christ. The activity of believers in the kingdom of God is identified by Ritschl with the work of the Holy Spirit, though at times he speaks of this Spirit as if representing an idea or a relation.

So much space has been taken in presenting the main features of Ritschl's theology that extended criticism is out of the question. With the system before him each one can form an estimate of its value and of its relation to the traditional views. The purely practical aim, and the exclusion of theoretical knowledge, make us wonder whether it ought not to be called a system of religious truth or the teaching of Christianity, rather than theology. It is certainly not theology in the old sense, according to which the Christian doctrines are related to other departments of thought and justified against the attacks of philosophy and science.

No one who examines this new system of religious teaching can fail to recognize Ritschl's independence, originality, and great achievements. From 1857, at a time when destructive criticism thrust dogmatic studies into the background, he concentrated his attention on them, particularly on the cardinal doctrine of redemption, and devoted his assiduous life to theological construction. He had the gift of seizing and placing into the foreground those fundamental problems on which religion depends. Instead of following mechanically the old traditions, he recognized the demand for a revision of the prev-

¹⁹ *Unterricht*, p. 3.

alent methods, and for a new beginning on a more solid basis. His conviction that philosophy, with its ever-changing systems, ought not to dominate religion and theology is not only true, but likewise, in view of the history of theology, a much-needed truth. Nor can we withhold admiration from his confidence in the religion of Christ as needing only to be presented in its purity, without philosophical and theoretical admixture, in order to produce the conviction of its genuineness. The disciples and early church felt its power; why should it not still be self-authenticating? And when we consider the inestimable service rendered by ethics and religion, we cannot question the importance of emphasizing their supreme value. In an age of materialism he exalted the spiritual aspirations and demanded the subordination of material interests; and in an age when theology was speculated out of reach of practical concerns he insisted on subordinating theology to religion, and on making it minister to practical Christianity.

To this recognition of so much that is admirable in the spirit and aim of Ritschl should be added the conviction of his sincerity. We must take into account the struggle required to pass from the school of Baur to a positive religious faith. His system was developed in an era of criticism and agnosticism; and we have every reason to believe that it was not the product of ambition, or of a desire for novelty, but of an inner impulse to satisfy his religious needs by means of the most earnest inquiries. That his own religious convictions were deep and firm is evident from his works, from the testimony of his pupils, and from the biography written by his son.

When, however, we inquire into the estimate of his theology as a system of Christian doctrine, we must pronounce it a presentation rather than a solution of problems. It is a ferment, not a finality. On every great doctrine which it discusses it excites more questions than it answers. It meets certain empirical requirements of the age; but are these requirements themselves ultimate, and do they exhaust the demands of the human mind? We can reject the *a priori* speculations of Plato and Hegel, and begin with the facts as Aristotle did, and with him

draw inferences from them which may be called speculative, but which are as much a necessity for the mind as it is to recognize the impressions received through the senses. From the phenomena we naturally make inferences respecting their source. We may not be able to give mathematical demonstrations respecting the nature of God, of Christ, and of the soul; but that does not prove a valid faith impossible. The energy of the mind refuses to rest in the dualism of Ritschl between practical and theoretical knowledge. The believer, if at all alive to the demands of reason, cannot adopt what Ritschl calls the Christian view of the world, and at the same time ignore the philosophical and scientific view. As the mind is one, so it requires unity, harmony, and an all-comprehensive system of thought. Considering the philosophical basis of his theology, we can understand a statement once made by Professor Harnack, that philosophy was Ritschl's weakest point.

Ritschl opposes subjectivity as a dangerous element in religion; yet his own system is too subjective, depending on personal impressions of value. Theology must search for a system which has objective value for all seekers of truth, not value merely for such as have Christian experience. For those who already believe this system has abundant confirmations; but they are valid only for the existing faith. What apologetic value for unbelievers has this theology as a system of objective truth?

We need other proof than that given of the validity of Scripture. Christ is made the ground of all religious authority; but the question how he obtained his revelation, and what proof he had of its validity, is not answered. Nor can we see why Christ, if only the first of prophets, should be called divine, and should receive divine honors. Must not his nature be unique if his relation to God is unique? And if we can trust his teachings so far as practical, why not likewise such as lie beyond the reach of experience? His Christology is unsatisfactory. The scriptural view of God certainly embraces much more than that of Ritschl. The new theology here reveals its phenomenalism to its serious disadvantage. Ritschl's doctrine of sin fails to reach the depth of Paul's discussion of depravity. In the exaltation

of the unity of believers we are in danger of losing the religious individuality in the totality of the kingdom, a totality which is one of those general notions which he professes to shun.

In the different editions of Ritschl's works his exegesis often varies. The exegesis itself leaves the impression that in many instances it is the product of his dogmatic system rather than that his system is the product of Scripture.

Ritschl's school contains too many independent thinkers to be controlled wholly by his views. They evidently also look on his theology, whatever abiding results they attribute to it, as a ferment and a problem. From the right wing, of which Kaftan is, perhaps, the best representative, to the left, represented by Bender, who reduces religion to a species of natural evolution, numerous conflicting views prevail.